EXPANDING PERSPECTIVISM TO TACKLE MODERN PROBLEMS

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Preface

We all care about subjectivities. From meeting friends we haven't seen in a while, to family members returning home, it's the little things that matter. So why does this process, at times, get complicated?

The complication arises from the various ways we frame these situations. The theoretical ideas, values, and philosophies we bring to these situations.

They can be called *ontologies*.

Contained in this book is an expansion of perspectivism based on ontological differences. Ontological differences impact everything significant in our lives, from the ways we navigate relationships to how we frame economic policy.

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Dramatic Self / Nominality / Performativity

[we] are capable of the greatest vices as well as of the greatest virtues.
—Rene Descartes

The dramatic self, and the need for rhetoric in the art of persuasion, as Aristotle noted, are topics of some significance in philosophy.[1] Yet, they appear to be largely misunderstood.

Can we identify an ontology here? The nominal ontology, broadly understood, revolves around philosophies such as nominalism, performativity, speech acts, the dramatic self, Ockham's Razor, and the emphasis on 'leadership.' It is a key theme within postmodernism.

Philosophers include David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Michel Foucault.

The ontology considers nominality over grand narratives, art over analytics, detachment over engagement, the center over the periphery, and performativity over other ontologies.

At its best, nominality expresses humanity's best qualities. But, like all ontologies, it is prone to obsession, error, and excess. Nominality is not restricted to a gender.

Let's hear some practical expressions before we consider theoretical aspects. The perspective comes across to me in the poems of Amanda Gorman, Dorothy Parker, and Phillis Wheatley. Here are a few verses:

> Thus may our crisis be our cry, our crossroad,
> The oldest ode we owe each other.
> We chime it, for the climate,
> For our communities.
> We shall respect and protect
> Every part of this planet,
> Hand it to every heart on this earth,
> Until no one's worth is rendered
> By the race, gender, class, or identity
> They were born. This morn let it be sworn
> That we are one one human kin,
> Grounded not just by the griefs
> We bear, but by the good we begin.
>
> —Amanda Gorman, An Ode We Owe[2]

> Lilacs blossom just as sweet
> Now my heart is shattered.
> If I bowled it down the street,
> Who's to say it mattered?
> If there's one that rode away
> What would I be missing?
> Lips that taste of tears, they say,
> Are the best for kissing.
>
> Eyes that watch the morning star
> Seem a little brighter;

Arms held out to darkness are
Usually whiter.
Shall I bar the strolling guest,
Bind my brow with willow,
When, they say, the empty breast
Is the softer pillow?

That a heart falls tinkling down,
Never think it ceases.
Every likely lad in town
Gathers up the pieces.
If there's one gone whistling by
Would I let it grieve me?
Let him wonder if I lie;
Let him half believe me.

—Dorothy Parker, Threnody[3]

TO show the lab'ring bosom's deep intent,
And thought in living characters to paint,
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter's and the poet's fire
To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!

—Phillis Wheatley, To S.M. A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works. (1773)[4]

Foucault frequently elaborated on nominal themes. He questioned why life as art wasn't a notion that was more commonplace. In this way he critiqued the excesses of modernity:

> What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? ... we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity.[5]

Excesses of mind and 'reason,' characteristic of the modern age, weakened the body, passions, and spirit, according to Foucault. This critique is valid. However, as we shall discuss, it is not complete. Foucault does not disambiguate diverse motivations and ontologies that produce this result.

Nominalism denies the existence of abstract entities and universals. Instead, there are distinct and particular instances. Terms like ‘green’ or ‘dignity,’ do not have independent existence, they group individual instances that share similarities. Understood this way, 'truth' reflects variations of the same principle, and differences are expressions of the same principle.

As we shall discuss, nominality plays an important role in modern politics.

William of Ockham was a 14th-century Franciscan friar who was an early exponent of nominalism. Stephen Lahey explains Ockham's view:

> Everything outside the soul is really singular and numerically one, for anything outside the soul is either simple or composite. If it is simple, it does not include many things ... If it is composite, one will finally have to arrive at a certain number of parts. Consequently each of these parts will be numerically one.
> Nominalists argue that universal terms are linguistic conveniences rather than reflective of separate metaphysical realities.[6]

Related to nominalism, in my opinion, are speech acts and performativity. Speech act theory developed in the mid-20th century with J.L. Austin's work. The theory considers how there are several layers to communication, especially performance.

Austin refers to the 'force' and intensity of what is said. For instance, 'I WANT ICE CREAM,' and 'I want ice cream,' has different meanings. One is a demand and the other is a request. This way, we can distinguish between the strong form and the more relatable form of any argument.[7]

Notably, 'intensity' can be discerned in all ontological arguments.

Performativity refers to how certain actions or expressions convey meaning. They have the power to bring about the reality they signify.

In this way, Judith Butler argued that gender is not a fixed or essential characteristic. Rather, repeated performance leads to reinforcement of gender norms and social identities. Butler wrote:

> There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.[8]

From the point of view of ontology, Butler's view is a valid ontological perspective. Each ontology contributes to the formation of gender identity.

In a similar vein, sociologist Erving Goffman explored the perspective of the dramatic self. Individuals represent themselves in daily life, play social roles, and shape their identities. Goffman noted that individuals participate in impression management by portraying themselves according to others' perceptions, intentionally or unintentionally.

On the front stage, individuals perform their parts under the gaze of public scrutiny. Motivations may be different backstage. Although not an argument for nominality, and often an argument against, Goffman explored some of the issues involved.[9]

In this book nominality is considered an ontological perspective with unique epistemological roots.

Ockham popularized a principle called Ockham's razor. It states that, for any given argument, the response with the fewest assumptions will be the best one. It was originally stated as "pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate," "plurality should not be posited without necessity." The idea is to avoid unnecessary complexity.

In practice, Ockham's razor may amount to a conflation of nominality with objective rationality. This produces arguments with slim logical support, a result frequently seen in the context of modern-day politics.

Arguments generated this way are, nevertheless, significant because nominality makes a case for nominality

itself. The ontology may produce its own consequences and logical effects.

The nominal ontology of 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume is evident in the following comment. He emphasizes how the philosophy that's 'easy' generally wins over the 'abstruse':

> It is certain that the easy and obvious philosophy will always, with the generality of mankind, have the preference above the accurate and abstruse; and by many will be recommended, not only as more agreeable, but more useful than the other. It enters more into common life; moulds the heart and affections; and, by touching those principles which actuate men, reforms their conduct, and brings them nearer to that model of perfection which it describes. On the contrary, the abstruse philosophy, being founded on a turn of mind, which cannot enter into business and action, vanishes when the philosopher leaves the shade, and comes into open day; nor can its principles easily retain any influence over our conduct and behaviour. The feelings of our heart, the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affections, dissipate all its conclusions, and reduce the profound philosopher to a mere plebeian.[10]

Hume's argument may at times be true. However, he fails to disambiguate ontological and situational exceptions. Instead, Hume sticks to a simple narrative in line with Ockham's razor.

Public opinion, for instance, is often divided. Such diversity of opinion supports the argument in this book for ontological diversity.

And Hume doesn't discuss whether nominality can be applied in support of complex and abstruse conversations. Arguably, it can be.

Given this single mindedness, it's not surprising that Hume said, "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions." In this way, Hume highlights one of our ontological battlegrounds.

Bertrand Russell considers the same question in his book, A History of Western Philosophy. Russell says prudence versus passion is a conflict that runs through history. According to Russell, we should not side wholly with one side or the other. Referring to Bacchus, the god of wine, vegetation, and fertility in ancient Greece, he says:

> The worshipper of Bacchus reacts against prudence. In intoxication, physical or spiritual, he recovers an intensity of feeling which prudence had destroyed; he finds the world full of delight and beauty, and his imagination is suddenly liberated from the prison of everyday preoccupation ... Without the Bacchic element, life would be uninteresting; with it, it is dangerous ... It is not a conflict in which we ought to side wholly with either party.[11]

The terms 'prudence' and 'passion' encompass diverse possibilities—there can be many forms of prudence, and many forms of passion, which makes the binary meaningless. Nevertheless, Russell makes a case for ontological equivalence when he argues for both prudence and passion.

Ontologies represent sustained emphases. It's not that individuals who are prudent aren't, at times, passionate. Or that individuals who are passionate aren't, at times, prudent. As such, ontology allows us to disambiguate such binaries into more meaningful constructs.

It is not surprising that, in excess, nominality is a philosophy that plays to populism. Many politicians have realized that this gives them an edge.

As Hume observed, nominality will deviate from the accurate and abstruse in favor of the easy and obvious. This argument came up in Habermas's debate with Foucault, one that can be characterized as situated between the objective rational and nominal ontologies.

Politicians frequently utilize nominality and Ockham's razor to make a case for nominality itself, as well as their specific agendas. But they may fall foul of alternative systems of knowledge assessment.

Ross Douthat, speaking on a New York Times podcast, said, "There is, I think, a way in which a male braggadocio, this performative masculine rebellion against liberal politesse shows up again and again, from Silvio Berlusconi, to Trump. Even Boris Johnson had some of this. I don't think it's a coincidence ... "[12]

In a political context, nominality often makes a case for excess rather than balance and perspectival equivalence. The roots of this imbalance may lie in our ontological battlegrounds.

In 1848, Alex de Tocqueville, speaking against socialism, after the French Monarchy of Louis Philippe was overthrown, said:

> Was it by appealing to the material needs of man, as a speaker of yesterday insisted, that the French Revolution accomplished those great deeds that the whole world marvelled at? Do you believe that it spoke of wages, of well-being, of unlimited wealth, of the satisfaction of physical needs?
> Do you believe that by speaking of such things it could have aroused a whole generation of men to fight for it at its borders, to risk the hazards of war, to face death? No, gentlemen, it was by speaking of greater things, of love of country, of the honor of France, of virtue, generosity, selflessness, glory, that it accomplished what it did. Be certain, gentlemen, that it is only by appealing to man's noblest sentiments that one can move them to attain such heights.[13]

Tocqueville could have promoted socialist ideals by applying nominality, but he chose not to. Instead, he utilized Ockham's razor to promote a different political agenda. He made a case for nominality itself, as well as his politics.

The need for 'leadership' is a common refrain in management and government. Experts say there are schools of leadership, but no philosophy of leadership.[14]

'Leadership' can be understood as the ability to facilitate operations. On the one hand, it's a hands-on, performative process. On the other hand, every ontology makes a case for leadership and different operational cultures.

There could be contextual, objective-rational, structural, nominal, or pragmatic cultures, to name a few possibilities.

Leadership styles have been studied in the corporate sector, and they are best understood in conjunction with organizational culture.

Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini describe how some companies have experimented with flatter structures and how employees on the ground make significant decisions. These companies have profited from these changes.

One initiative at the Large Hadron Collider opted for a bottom-up peer-to-peer system that allowed more than 3,000 scientists to coordinate their activities successfully. Meanwhile, companies like IBM and Nokia may have missed market opportunities due to bureaucracy that hampered internal communication and creativity.

In their book Humanocracy: Creating Organizations as Amazing as the People Inside Them, Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini describe companies that 'upended canonical management beliefs':

> The problem is, conjuring up a plausible image of a super-flat, thoroughly decentralized organization isn't easy. As human beings, we're prisoners of the familiar—and there's little that's more familiar than bureaucracy. … Nucor, the world's most innovative and consistently profitable steelmaker, is a case study in what happens when you invert the pyramid and unleash the capabilities of those on the front lines. Haier, the Qingdao-based home appliance maker, has built a culture that

encourages everyone to think and act like an entrepreneur.[15]

The argument for decentralized organization is not an argument against 'leadership,' per se, but these examples highlight alternative possibilities.

When viewed in isolation, those in favor of 'leadership,' say the function is necessary for motivation, and coordination.

On the downside, leadership creates problems of hierarchy that stifle innovation and lead to corruption and favoritism. Flow of information is warped. And, in the absence of a consultative process, arbitrary and poor decisions are often made.

A group of peers may not need a leader. If an individual proposes to be the 'leader,' it destabilizes the group and creates a hierarchy. The leader is empowered and the rest are disempowered. This is the very reality the group wants to avoid.

It seems, the question of leadership is a matter of ontology. Structurality will support existing hierarchical structures, while the value ontology may be ambivalent on the question.

Nominality will claim privileged insights into the question, and objective rationality will oppose hierarchies.

The concept may have been necessary in the past. But now it should be considered a situational need tied to the way we understand culture.

Nominality is both necessary and unavoidable. Leadership, in many modern contexts, is not, and we are in the early days of its ontological disaggregation.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book Beyond Good and Evil, speaking for the nominal ontology asks a pertinent question:

> SUPPOSING that Truth is a woman—what then? Is there not ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women—that the terrible seriousness and clumsy importunity with which they have usually paid their addresses to Truth, have been unskilled and unseemly methods for winning a woman? Certainly she has never allowed herself to be won; and at present every kind of dogma stands with sad and discouraged mien—IF, indeed, it stands at all![16]

Nietzsche was a volatile proponent of the nominal ontology, albeit an articulate one. He may have been justifiably frustrated with the state of the world in the late 19th century—the excesses of bureaucracy, and the excesses of the structural and objective rational ontologies.

Misplaced values no doubt played a part too. Nietzsche's comments on 'truth' must be weighed against ontological diversity which paints a complex picture.

Nietzsche frequently swung between balanced expressions of his ontology and calls to excess. Here he asks whether truth can originate out of error:

> How could anything originate out of its opposite? for example, truth out of error? or

> the will to truth out of the will to deception? or selfless deeds out of selfishness? or the pure and sunlike gaze of the sage out of lust? Such origins are impossible; whoever dreams of them is a fool, indeed worse; the things of highest value must have another, peculiar origin—they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the 'thing-in-itself'—there must be their basis, and nowhere else.

Despite hyperbole, Nietzsche suggests that something good can indeed come out of its opposite. In a world of differences, this is an important insight.

The perspectival nature of differences suggests that 'truth,' as we often understand it, is generally complex. This complexity, from an epistemological perspective, is discussed more in chapter 8 under *epistemological equivalence*.

In our exploration of nominality the question 'Who are you?' is significant. Hannah Arendt suggests that this question lies at the center of participatory democracy. We are pushed to consider differences and dimensionality, and the uniqueness of an individual. Paul A. Kottman writes:

> … immediately after Arendt writes of the 'curious intangibility' of 'who' someone is for philosophical discourse, she links philosophy's inability to determine 'who' someone is to

> '*politics.*' Philosophy's failure to name 'who' someone uniquely is, in other words, also signals a failure of traditional Western politics. It indicates, for instance, the extent to which traditional philosophy and politics respond to universals, rather than to unique persons and their interaction.[17]

Adriana Cavarero, in her book Relating Narratives: Story-Telling and Selfhood, explores the subjectivity of the '*you*,' and says that the '*you*' comes before the *we*, before the plural *you* and before the *they*:

> Symptomatically, the *you* [*tu*] is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics. The 'you' is ignored by the individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the *I*, and the 'you' is masked by a Kantian form of ethics that is only capable of staging an *I* that addresses itself as a familiar 'you' [*un 'io' che si da solamente del 'tu'*]. Neither does the 'you' find a home in the schools of thought to which individualism is opposed—these schools reveal themselves for the most part to be affected by a moralistic vice, which, in order to avoid falling into the decadence of the *I*, avoids the contiguity of the *you*, and privileges collective, plural pronouns. Indeed, many 'revolutionary' movements (which range from traditional communism to the feminism of sisterhood) seem to share a curious linguistic code based on the intrinsic morality of pronouns. The *we* is always

> positive, the *plural you* [*voi*] is a possible ally, the *they* has the face of an antagonist, the *I* is unseemly, and the *you* [*tu*] is, of course, superfluous.[17]

In the form of ontologies, the alterity of 'you' can be understood in several dimensions. Even if we consider instances when these dimensions collapse to one, we must consider instances when they do not. There are contextual, structural, objective-rational, nominal, and pragmatic implications to consider.

Certain interpretations may seem superfluous, but we cannot reject any realities. This discomfort gives us our multiple ontologies.

Similarly, Butler, in Senses of The Subject, reconciles diverse approaches, and captures an ontological perspective that highlights one of the major tensions in philosophy. Butler says:

> Just as philosophy founders time and again on the question of the body, it tends to separate what is called thinking from what is called sensing, from desire, passion, sexuality, and relations of dependency. It is one of the great contributions of feminist philosophy to call those dichotomies into question and so to ask as well whether in sensing, something called thinking is already at work, whether in acting, we are also acted upon, and whether in coming into the zone of the thinking and speaking I, we are at once radically formed and also bringing something about.[18]

But in this reconciliation we go back to the question of coherence, dimensionality, partiality and incompleteness. Every ontological perspective is valid but not complete.

Nominality, just like all ontologies, attempts to express itself equally across genders. In reality, the situation is more complex. Due to cultural norms men within a nominal ontology may feel a lot freer to be themselves. They may believe they've been given a license to do so, more than women within the same ontology.

The necessary counterweights to the excesses of an ontology are alternatives. In the case of nominality, objective rationality plays such a role.

Even though the ontology positions itself against making generalizations, in excess nominality will resort to loose generalizations backed by Ockham's razor.

Objective rationality, based on a consistent methodology, will react against these 'irrationalities' giving us one of the major tensions in philosophy.

Hume wanted to go as far as to limit the scope of objective rationality to mathematics and logical reasoning, and not belief-formation, and ethical or aesthetic deliberations.

In support of this position Hume said 'causality' was a display of regular succession and constant conjunction. This supports the argument for ontological diversity. Hume believed that we cannot understand effects by looking at causes. This is discussed more in chapter 10.

Despite its merits, there are arguments against it. For one, nominality tends to ignore the consequences of its actions.

Nietzsche couldn't help creating metanarratives, even though this was anathema to his philosophy. Ivan Spencer explains, comparing his ideas with postmodernism:

> Like Nietzsche, present-day postmodern culture undermines systems and refuses to replace them. Postmodernism, a recent but waning movement that loves Nietzsche, sees all metanarratives as merely another perspective ... Yet postmodernism waned because it began to look like a metanarrative itself.[19]

Postmodernism is an intellectual and cultural trend that began in the mid-twentieth century that influenced fields such as philosophy, literature, architecture, and cultural studies. The movement rejects overarching narratives and universal themes.

In terms of knowledge construction, postmodernism holds that this varies according to social context, and blends insights with contextuality.

For instance, Jacques Derrida's ideas around deconstruction and Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality critique consumer culture, and commodification driven by advertising.

But it's important to disambiguate postmodernism as a mix of contextual, structural, and nominal ontologies, a complex program positioned against the excesses of modernity.

As a result, the movement wasn't well understood. Discussing postmodernism, Noam Chomsky said:

> If you look at the phenomena as a whole ... I think the effect is pretty clear, it allows people to take a very radical stance, more radical than

> thou, but to be completely dissociated from anything that's happening, ... One reason is nobody can understand a word they're saying.[20]

Every ontology faces the challenge of avoiding obsession and excess. Excess may seem seductive in the short term, but it can be calamitous in the long term.

Hume, in his essay "Of National Characters," resorts to loose generalizations about people from several nations. He believed he was making insightful philosophical observations. But his failure to research his beliefs thoroughly may have been his mistake.

Not surprisingly, he comes across as racist when he wrote of racial inferiority of 'black' people. Hume wrote:

> There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular.

In the Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche wrote: "This world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!"[22]

Nietzsche's rousing claims likely inspired the war-mongering Nazis. Although he spoke against antisemitism, he made a strong case for nominality. This, in my opinion, was his mistake.

In excess, and given the tendency to reject values, deductive conclusions, and the constraints of structurality, nominality is capable of colossal blunders. We are seeing such blunders in the form of wars being played out on the international stage.

As such, the challenge we face is to balance our motivations and appreciate diverse ontologies. The arguments for nominality are certainly valid. But not in excess.